The Man Who Made Harold Bell Wright

Message in "That Printer of Udells" Caused E. W. Reynolds to Publish First Book by "Dickens of the Rural Route"

By JOHN B. WALLACE

THE title of this article may sound like a pun but you may rest assured it was not intended for one. It is the truth but not all the truth, for if Elsbery W. Reynolds made Harold Bell Wright, conversely Harold Bell Wright made Elsbery W. Reynolds. If ever two men were interdependent for success they were these same two. The sheer business ability and untiring industry of the one and the genius of the other might eventually have brought them prosperity but it is doubtful if either would have attained his present pinnacle of fame and fortune. It took the mysterious hand of that master alchemist, Fate, to transform these two men—one a struggling bookseller, the other a poverty-stricken preacher—into millionaires of national prominence.

A peculiar kinship of spirit brought these men together and knitted them into bonds of friendship that have remained intact to this day. Wright has always insisted that Reynolds is the only man who understands him. Reynolds says that the inspiration of Wright's abiding and unshakable faith gave him the courage to persist in the face of almost insurmountable difficulties.

As I sat, the other day, on the spacious porch of the Reynolds mansion at Relay Heights, in Southern California, and allowed my eyes to roam over the magnificent estate—one of the show places of the Southland—it was hard to realize that some three decades back the owner had been ringing doorbells in the small towns of the Middle West in the humble and despised rôle of book canvasser.

The face of the man beside me was the face of a dreamer, a student. If you did not know the man your first guess would be that he was a college professor. Only the keen glint in his eyes and the square set of his jaw betrayed the man of affairs. But behind the soft-spoken courtesy, the kindliness of his manner, one caught a hint of that egotism that is ever present in men of strong will, an egotism tempered by dearly bought knowledge of human limitations. One sensed that here was a man who had risen through his own efforts, a man to lean upon but not one who leans, a man who liked to grant favors but not to ask them. And to one knowing the proud spirit of Harold Bell Wright, uniting the sensitiveness of the artist with the zeal of the exhorter and the positiveness of a genius, the thought involuntarily comes, how has the friendship of these men, both of such positive temperament, persisted unimpaired throughout these long years?

Perhaps the story of their lives is the answer.

Mr. Reynolds attributes his success to the lessons he learned through necessity.

"Necessity is as truly the mother of success as she is of invention," he says. "Many a man fails to find himself until forced by adverse circumstances. Then he makes or breaks."

Mr. Reynolds was born on a farm in Missouri. He went to a country school and then for a couple of years to a grade school in a near-by town, after which he was turned adrift to hunt for a job. Purposeless, with no definite ambition, he drifted from one job to another his only object being to find something which would enable him to exist.

Attracted by the glittering inducements held out to book solicitors he started out as a canvasser. He soon found that the promise of big money for easy work was a myth. He found that he had tackled one of the hardest games in the world, a job replete with heartbreaking disappointments. But his pride was engaged and he would not quit. Book canvassing is the acid test of salesmanship. The canvasser is not only trying to sell something that the customer does not want, usually cannot afford, but is compelled to invade the victim's home to do so. But young Reynolds found in it a freedom which he loved and an uncertainty that appealed to his spirit of adventure.

"There is no better training for a young man than ringing doorbells," he told me, as his eye strayed over his countless acres of orange trees. "It teaches him persistency, courtesy and gives him a knowledge of human nature that he can acquire in no other occupation. It was the knowledge I gained by talking to people in their homes that enabled me to realize the appeal of Mr. Wright's books. It enabled me to direct my advertising straight to the heart of the people who make up the backbone of America. That is why you will find his books, not in the homes of the wealthy and cultured, but on the little shelf beside the family Bible in the farmhouses and in the small towns. It is not always given to us to see that, although we seemingly are making no progress toward the great goal of success, we are unconsciously acquiring the qualities and experience that will eventually bring reward."

Book canvassing finally brought the young solicitor to Chicago where he spent ten of the best years of his life vainly trying to get a foothold. At last discouraged with the meager opportunities of a salaried man he determined to go into business for himself. With his own capital, amounting to but $115, he incorporated the Book Supply Company. Then began the real battle. Time after time it seemed as if nothing could prevent the little company from foundering. But somehow Reynolds always managed to pull it through. And then in 1901 came the event that was finally to set his feet on the broad highway of achievement.

Mr. Reynolds had always been an ardent church worker. While attending services one Sunday he heard Harold Bell Wright, a minister from Kansas who was substituting for the regular pastor, deliver a sermon called "Sculptors of Life" which so impressed him that he sought the visitor out after the closing prayer. This meeting proved to be the turning point in both of their lives.

Mr. Wright had also endured a life of toil and privation. He had contended with not only poverty but ill health. Born in 1872 at Rome, New York, he had been one of four boys, only two of whom survived. Left motherless at the age of ten, this boy, shy but proud, was early sent forth to do battle with the world. He had some talent as a painter and it was toward an artistic career that his first ambition was directed. Lacking the means to study under a master he was forced to turn his ability to such humble channels as decorating and house painting. While in the little quarry town of Grafton, Ohio, he had been converted to the doctrines of Christianity and his imagination fired by the possibilities of reformation in that field, he resolved to abandon painting and become a minister. With this end in view he—at the age of twenty—entered the preparatory department of Hiram College. He had no means whatever and was forced to labor after hours to subsist.

The strain of overwork proved too much for his not overly strong constitution and he was soon forced to quit college. He sought to regain his health in the Ozark Mountains in Southern Missouri where he obtained employment at farm work, painting and sketching during slack intervals.

It was here that he gained the keen insight into the character of the mountain folk that enabled him to picture them so accurately in "The Shepherd of the Hills" and other of his books. It was here also that he preached his first sermon. He found a peculiar appeal in his ministry to these simple people and soon he accepted a regular pastorate at Pierce City, Missouri. His salary was $400 a year and a large portion of that in garden truck.

Soon after his marriage he received a call to Pittsburg, a little mining town in Kansas. Here in this rough little city the young minister found ample work for his crusading spirit.

It was while fighting evil in this little town that he conceived the idea for his first book, "That Printer of Udells." This was an exposition in story form of ideas for church reformation which he had been expounding from the pulpit. He saw that the church as it was then conducted was accomplishing but little good in the reformation of the community and he wanted to reorganize it on a more practical basis. He had no intention of writing a novel when he began the story but intended reading it to his congregation in lieu of a sermon. His friends, however, persuaded him that the work had merit and he set forth to Chicago to find a publisher.

Immediately he found himself confronting a stone wall of prejudice. Publishers could see no money in a book with a religious theme, especially with the scenes laid in the present. That was the day of the historical novel and the swashbuckler romance. Disheartened, Wright was about to return to his little church at Pittsburg when he met Reynolds.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm with which his sermon had been received he asked the book dealer to read his story. Mr. Reynolds readily consented but told Wright that he could not consider publishing it as his company was not a publishing house but mail order booksellers.

To alleviate the author's manifest disappointment, Mr. Reynolds promised him his assistance and advice in getting the book published elsewhere if he found it meritorious.

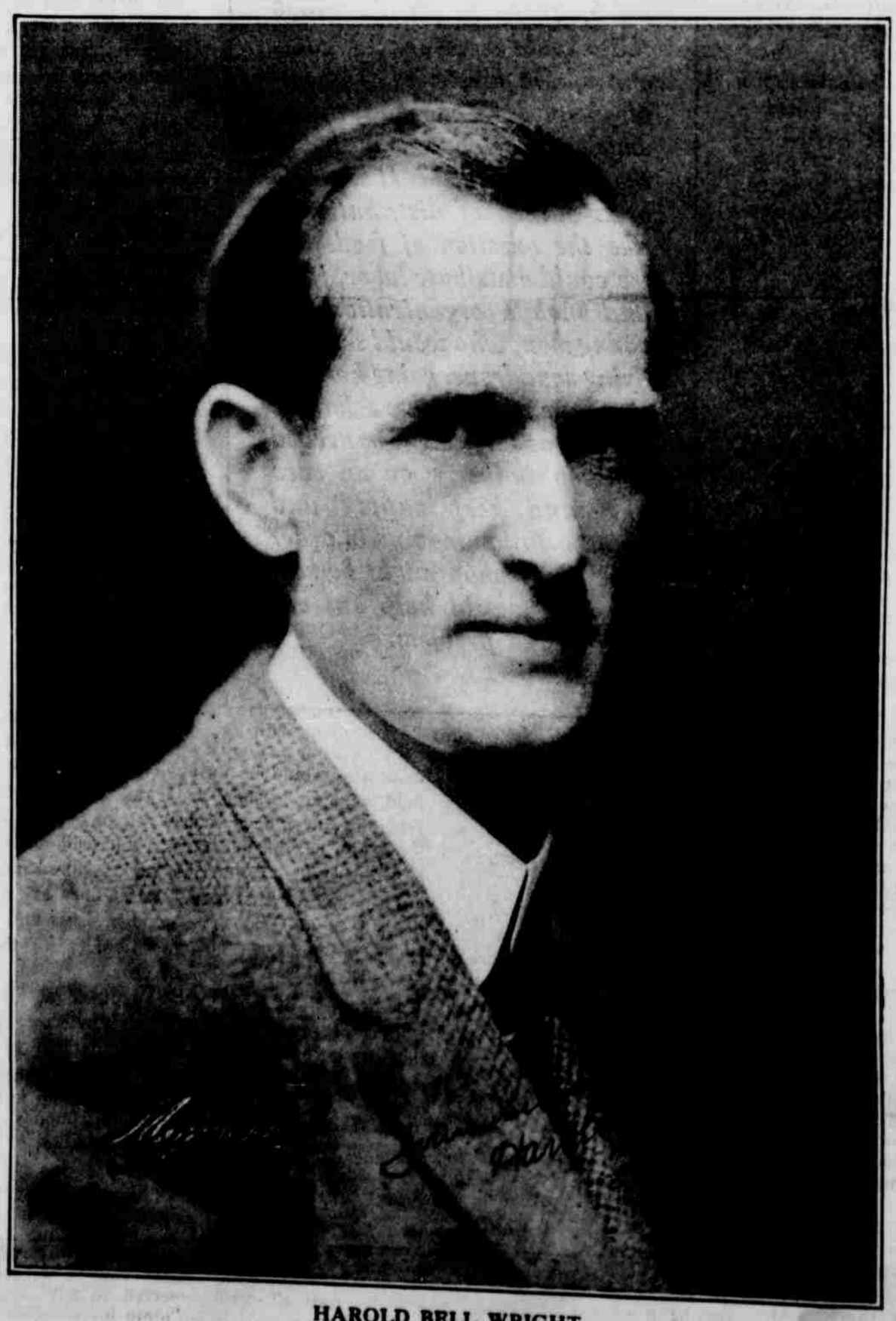
"I had hoped you could find means to publish it yourself," Wright told him. "I thought maybe it could be printed with paper covers to sell for about fifteen cents. I did not write the book to make money. I want to get my message before the world."

He was told to call the following Friday as the book dealer was too busy to read the novel except in the evenings after work.

When Wright next called upon his newly found friend a surprise awaited him.

"Mr. Wright," the publisher said, "I have decided to publish your book myself. If I can break even on it I will be satisfied in the knowledge that perhaps it will do for some other man what it has done for me."

As Mr. Reynolds repeated this conversation the other day he



HAROLD BELL WRIGHT